

Media and Political Discourse: The Nigerian experience

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ABSTRACT

Media being a channel of communication has being an un-negligible instrument in the progress and development of every society. It is a tool which can be used to re-orientate, influence and guide the masses particularly in this democratic dispensation of Nigeria. Therefore, modern political environment cannot be sustained anywhere in the world without the presence and vibrant role of the media. The media is expected to discharge its social responsibility in the political domain of Nigeria. It is in view of this, the paper explores the pivotal role of the media in the democratic politics of Nigeria, with a view to understanding its contribution in the political development of the country. Social responsibility theory has been adopted in this paper to serve as guide in explaining the issue under investigation. The paper adopts secondary sources in generating useful data for the study, they include; journals, periodicals, articles, books, internet materials and conference papers that have direct bearing on the subject matter. It is suggested that the media should be professional and live up to the expectation of the public by disseminating vital and truthful information in line with the constitutional provision of the country, which will raise the political consciousness of the citizens to effectively contribute in the development of the political environment.

Key words: Media, Politics, Democracy, Social Responsibility, Nigeria

Introduction

Media being a channel of communication has three main functions of educating, information and entertaining the society apart from being a bridge between the government and the governed as well as the mouthpiece for the downtrodden, the voiceless members of the society. Recognizing the importance of the media, the Nigerian constitution specifically assigned a “watchdog role” to the media. Lending credence to its recognition, the media is the only profession mentioned in section 21 of the 1979 and section 39 of the 1999 constitution respectively. That is why Deane (2016) attested that, the role of media in every society is paramount as no society would survive without the presence of media. However, there was heavy presence of the media even before independence beginning with the establishment of *Iwe Iroyin* in 1859 by Rev. Henry Twonsened who was a Christian missionary and later the Nationalists newspapers such as the West African pilot of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Eastern Nigeria Guardian, Southern Nigeria Defender, Daily Comets among others came to the fore to contribute in various ways to the political independence on one hand and development of the country on the other hand. According to Smith and Smith (2016) the formation of these nationalist’s newspapers was aimed to push for independence and to challenge government media which is being controlled by the British government which prevent it from performing its watchdog function, instead, it serves as a platform for defamation, propaganda, castigation and campaign of calumny nature against the opponent. It was argued that, the Nigeria’s political independence would not have been possible in 1960 without the active participation of the media in achieving the goal of independence by vehemently criticizing the exploitative policies of the colonial government.

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory is one of the four theories of the press established and recognized by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1954) through Hutchins commissions of the 1940’s with the view to ensure press freedom in the society. Social responsibility theory was a child of

dissatisfaction of Libertarian theory of the press for disseminate media messages from their original context and giving people what they desire for personal benefit rather than what they were expected to deliver for societal commitment. According to the theory the press is tasked to be socially responsible to the society in its operations by providing accurate and objective information and create avenue for discussion and debate on vital issues of public concern. The media is expected to be free and conduct its watchdog function for the protection of the rights of the common man and to hold authorities responsible for its day-to-day running as well as pursue the cardinal objectives of entertaining, informing and educating the citizens

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In a political dispensation, media be it print, electronic or social media can be very useful in creating awareness to the generality of people by way of educating the society on how to register for election, how to cast their votes during elections, how to avoid election malpractice and how to interact with their elected representatives among others things. In view of this, Hayes (2012) described media as an extremely significant part of the political contest; since it serves as an avenue of providing millions of people with information they need to know. These would no doubt go in line with the saying that, if you do not exist in the media, you do not exist politically. Moreover, politicians are making use of the media to reach out to their electorates since they cannot come in contact with all the electorates due to their diverse nature as well as their population. Despite the population Ogbeidi (2012) explained that, unless citizens have accurate and adequate information on every issue and problems facing them, they would be powerless to take rational decision on them. As without such useful information people would not be able to understand the day-to-day running of government talk less of taking part in the electioneering process. This claim was confirmed by Blankson (2012) who revealed that, media can convey to the relevant authorities the problems, needs, hopes, grievances and aspirations of the people and the responses of the government authorities may in turn be transmitted by the media to the people particularly during campaign period.

In order words, media plays significant role in the crusade of the fight against corruption through the creating foundation for ensuring corrupt free society especially in Nigeria. That is why Mikail (2016) attested that, the watch dogging role of the media deals entirely with exposing wrongdoing in the public interest and caution citizens about those that are doing them harm and supply them with the information they need to know. For instance, several corrupt cases were exposed by the media in Nigeria such as the case of certificate forgery of former speaker of the federal house of representative Salisu Buhari, contract scandal of late senate president Chuba Okadigbo, recent grass cutting scandal in the IDPs camp by the sacked secretary to the government of the federation, Babachir David Lawal among many exposed corruption cases by the media. Based on the available records (Oyeyinka., Lateef., Omolayo., Akeem., Qasim & Onyinyechi (2013) emphasized that, the society stands a better chance to benefit from the media not only in terms of education, entertainment and information but in addressing sensitive issues such as corruption.

According to International Press Institute (2016) for media to be accountable to its readers, viewers and listeners, the media must be free from economic pressure and political influence in order to retain the loyalty, respect and trust in the society. Although, despite some challenges, the media has recorded tremendous progress in ensuring the unity progress and understanding among Nigeria by designing jingles, sponsored programs, and adverts. However, Bratic (2006) noted that, with more than 200 tribes in the country, media were used to informed people about other tribes' culture, food, religious beliefs, and heritage all in an effort to create mutual understanding as well as cement bond and peaceful co-existence among various ethnic groups in the country. Nevertheless, the media has publicized the cultural heritage of Nigeria as a nation which has assisted in attracting foreign investors particularly in patronizing locally made goods

and visiting tourist's sites located in various states across the country which has yielded the country's earnings.

For instance, during festive periods like *Hawandaushe* in the north, coronation/wedding in the east, carnival in the south, foreigners were seen in large number who came all the way from their countries to catch a glimpse in the cultural display of Nigeria culture. All these were as a result of media that publicized the Nigerian culture to the outside world. In the area of preaching religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, the media has been the tool that is being used by adherents of different faiths to preach the word of God to their followers. It is based on these that, Egbue (2006) said, the ownership of media by the two-major religion of Islam and Christianity in the country is common because they wanted to have a channel that they can use to be talking directly to their followers. This is to attest how vital media is in setting agenda for the society to follow. Similarly, it is through the operation of the media that citizens were enlightened the more, on the economic status of Nigeria as a nation. According to Omoteso and Ishola Mobolaji (2014) the dwindling economic fortunes that befall many nations globally which drag a number of countries including Nigeria into recession were only heard through the media because many citizens were ignorant of the situation which mandated the use of media to give proper explanation to citizens. The outbreak of a deadly disease called EBOLA is another trail moment of Nigeria as a country whereby timely use of the media to educate people on the dangers, sign and symptoms as well preventive measures has helped greatly in tackling the menace within a very short period of time. Although, experts reveal that few lives were lost, but had it been the media were not used on time through designing jingles, announcements, news, adverts, posters and banners, the situation would have claimed more lives.

Having said that, on the effectiveness of the media generally in the African continent and Nigeria in particular, a veteran journalist, Ray Ekpu, (cited Uche, 1989) decried lack of freedom as well as media ownership in the developing countries as some of the major obstacles preventing journalists from conducting their assigned responsibilities judiciously even in the present democratic dispensation. He maintains that, for media organizations to be successful they must be free from any interference be it from government or private individuals.

On press freedom, for the media to achieve its watchdog function, it must be free to discharge both its constitutional and traditional functions unhindered. Thus, free press is the right or the capability of practitioners to direct their opinions and report events accurately as they are without essentially seeking endorsement from any person or group and without being endangered to any form of harassment, persecution, intimidation or molestation. This is given credence to section 36(1) of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which specifies that:

... Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.

Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Similarly stipulates that: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (cited in *Awake!*, 1998: 10). On the other hand, Ojo (2013) mention two types of free press, firstly, absolute press freedom and, secondly, qualified press freedom. According to him, the first one is a situation whereby the press is absolutely free and serves its spectators without being endangered to any form of intimidation and harassment. Moreover, it needs to be highlighted that there is no organization in the whole world that enjoys this kind of absolute freedom even the so called advanced democracies of the Western world. The qualified press on the other hand is a system where the media is not free to perform its roles. Nigerian media appears to be a classical of qualified press freedom. The presence of the Official Secrets Act of 1962 is a hindrance. It specifies some 'no-

go areas' with respect to media having access to vital information which would not be in the best interest of the government to release hidden under the auspices of national interest

In order to appreciate the insignificant nature of section 39 of the Constitution, it is essential to refer to the provisions of constitution of other nations or relating to free press. According to the first modification of the United States Constitution which offers that: 'congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances' (Ojo, 2013). However, Section 162 (4) of the Constitution of Ghana reads thus: 'Editors and media managers and other institutions of the mass media shall not be subject to control or interference by government nor shall they be penalized or harassed for their editorial opinions and views, or the contents of their publication.' Similarly, Section 36 of the Constitution of Malawi enacts thus: 'the press shall have the right to report and publish freely, within Malawi and abroad and to be accorded the fullest possible facilities for access to public information'.

Having said that, education, entertainment and information is a collective role of the mass media in any civilized society and that is why the media is viewed as the overseer of the society. Recognizing the importance of the media, a former American President, Thomas Jefferson said: "Were it left for me to decide whether to have a government without a media or a media without a government, I will not hesitate to prefer the latter." This and many other quotes of great men and scholars around the globe emphasize the importance of press in any political settings.

In the recent time, Professionals and Scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the Nigerian media due to unethical behaviors of some journalists who engages in collecting bribes in the course of discharging their responsibilities which is fast eroding the media rating and credibility. Warning that, if the media would be allowed to be free from any interferences be it from government, groups or individuals, media must uphold the ethics of journalism profession and avoid any form of unethical behaviors. Media must at all times maintain the basic qualities of receptive and responsible journalism and fight the temptation of corruption and unprofessionalism and the media must practice good journalism so as to attain an egalitarian society. (Agbese, 1997; Akinfeleye, 1997; Akinleye, 2002; Agu, 2006; Ishiekwene, 2006; Izeze, E, 2006; Shittu—Alamu, 2006; Udoakah, 2006; Eke, 2014)

Conclusion

The media industry in the country is a product of the milieu in which it operates. They were in existence before the country's political independence, since 1859 when *Iwe Iroyin* was established to the emergence of several others including the West African pilot of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Eastern Nigeria Guardian, Southern Nigeria Defender, Daily Comets among others. The media has been steering the political affairs in the country since the colonial period. They were very instrumental in championing the course of Nigeria's independence by the nationalist in 1960, and since then have been playing significant role in the political development of the country. It has rose to the occasion severally in educating the people about their political rights to information, right to vote, when to vote, how to vote, rules of election, exposes corrupt practices meted out by those in Authority at different point in time in the political history of the country, on health related issues such as EBOLA and AIDS. Also, the Nigerian media in the present political dispensation have informed the citizens through their daily commentaries, adverts, jingles, news reportage and documentaries about the economic state of the nation, cultural heritage, religious issues, preaches peace and unity between and among the different entities that made up of the country. It is observed that no nation can survive and developed without the presence of active media outlets serving as a bridge between underdevelopment on one hand and development on the other hand. This is on account of its pivotal role of communicating, educating, informing and

entertaining the public. Therefore, it is suggested of the media to discharge its social responsibility freely by disseminating truthful, factual and objective information without fair or favor. It should not be the mouthpiece of the government or any other person or group of persons; rather, it should serve the interest of the masses by educating them faithfully and holding government accountable when the need arises.

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